

## arbitrio by handydandynotebook

**Series:** apparently i take requests now and nothing is a one-shot anymore [1]

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**Summary:**

“Gonna sleep in the car before Neil gets on me about making noise.”

“Billy, it’s too cold for that...besides, Neil isn’t going to wake up yet.”

“How do you know?”

What, does Susan think she’s a fucking fortune teller now?

Sure enough, she doesn’t have a straight answer for him. She stumbles over syllables that don’t shape into sentences and the last thing Billy feels like doing is indulging her.

(or, alternatively, where I attempt to take a sickfic prompt but instead, it turns into the one where Billy and Susan dispose of Neil's

corpse in a dumpster at the gay bar.)

## arbitrio

### Author's Note:

soooo Anon left me this comment on tot acerba funera: "I realize the sick isn't the point of this fic but I am hurting for Billy so bad and if you would actually write sickfic where Susan takes care of him that would be amazing."

and i considered it. dude, if ur still here and reading this, it, uh...it probably isn't \*exactly\* what ur looking for. i'm assuming just like, from the wording, ur looking for smth more fluffy? but. i'm not. i'm not rly great at fluff, ngl, i'm sorry. also, i just don't think billy would rly...let susan do that?? irdk.

but! i tried to meet you halfway, okay? and by that i mean, here's sick!billy helping susan get rid of neil's corpse. takes place before, during, and after chap 1 of tot acerba funera: a is for acupuncture. u don't rly need to read that for this to make sense, but it might help clear up some details.

Billy isn't sick.

Billy doesn't get sick. He really doesn't. Hasn't had so much as a cold in years, albeit he's claimed one as cover here and there whenever coke overuse made him maybe sorta sniffly and Neil started to eye him up like he might be suspicious.

Billy isn't sick.

If he's feeling achy, well, he's just sore because Neil laid the belt on him pretty hard two days ago after he got sent home from school midday Monday, written up and suspended. If he's coughing, well, it's just because he's been smoking more than usual. Neil's been stressed out lately, so that means Billy's stressed out too.

"No," his father says sharply when Billy takes a seat at the breakfast

table.

And Billy blinks at him, confused but careful.

“You’re not going to sit with us and cough all over the food like a human biohazard. I raised you to show more courtesy than that.” Neil gives him a stern look. “Go back to bed.”

“I’m not even—“

“Go back to bed, Billy.”

Billy hears the warning heighten in his father’s tone. He doesn’t argue. He hauls himself back to his bedroom and it’s whatever. He wasn’t really hungry anyway.

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Okay, so Billy is sick.

He got himself suspended because he felt something coming on. He knows his body. He was feeling off kilter and sluggish, uncomfortable in the chest when he inhaled too deeply. So he put his boots on the desk in history class and flipped the teacher the bird when she asked him to sit properly. Even went the extra mile and sneered, told her to blow him when her jaw hit the floor.

He figured it’d buy him enough time to recover without having to call in sick, or get in trouble for skipping class. A suspension was one indiscretion and only likely to invoke one punishment. Skipping multiple days would’ve been multiple indiscretions and more likely to invoke multiple punishments.

In retrospect he should’ve just called in sick because the whole point of avoiding that route was avoiding having to admit it, but he can’t really hide it. Whatever he’s got came on hard and fast, doubled-down by Monday evening. It hasn’t gotten any better. Billy feels bad all over, the cough is near constant, and he’s shaking with chills. Puts his leather jacket on before he buries himself under the blankets and still can’t get warm.

And the coughing, ugh, the fucking coughing. Billy knows he’s being loud. He tries to hold it in but he just can’t. Spasm after spasm

squeezes his lungs until they're aching for air. His chest feels like it's full of swamp muck and all he can do is ride it out, clutch at his ribs until he makes it to the oxygen on the other side.

Billy should get up. He should make himself get off his ass, go buy some cough drops or at least refill his glass of water. He's going to make it happen. He's definitely going to make it happen...just maybe not yet.

He never really gets around to it. Spends most of the afternoon slogging through coughs and trying to get comfortable even though it doesn't really matter which way he tosses or turns, he's still cold to the bone, chest stabbing with every burdened breath. The day drags and Billy catches snippets of the other members of the household moving about, knows it's evening when Neil sticks his head in.

"I dug this out of the cabinet for you," he announces, holding up a blue container. "Vapor rub. It'll calm your cough down. Help you sleep."

"Thanks, Dad."

His father pads across the carpet, sets the container down on Billy's nightstand, right within reach. He hovers uncertainly, eyes narrowed. Opens his mouth to say something and maybe he does, but Billy doesn't catch it, snapping upright to bury another flurry of coughs into his closed fist. It's a forceful fit and before he knows it, his father's thumping him on the back. He's probably trying to help but the heel of his hand connects with one of the bruises the belt buckle left and Billy can't stop himself before he flinches.

Neil retracts his hand, leaves without another word. Billy rakes in breath at the coda of the coughs, air scraping against his roughshod throat. He goes as deep as he can even though it hurts, snatches the container of vapor rub.

Billy begins to unscrew the lid and notices some of the ointment is crusted under the lid. It flakes off. This stuff looks old. Billy checks the date on the label. Sure enough, it's been expired for close to a year.

He throws it across the room in frustration, watches it bounce off the wall. Lies back down and pulls the covers up to his chin.

At some point Neil bangs on his door and demands he cut out the racket, probably thinking Billy rebuffed his generosity. Billy's too exhausted to bother explaining the shit's expired. Instead he turns his face into the pillow and smothers his fits into the fabric, hoping it muffles the sounds.

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Sometime later Thursday morning, Susan knocks on his door. Billy contemplates pretending to be asleep. Really, he wishes he was. He's feeling pretty rundown but he can't seem to get more than a wink before he wakes up coughing.

But if he doesn't answer it now, she'll probably just bother him later. So Billy plods to the door and pulls it open.

"What?"

"Um," Susan begins eloquently, blinking at him as she fiddles with the thin object in her hands. A thermometer.

"Neil tell you to do this?"

"N-No, but, uh. It's probably a good idea to check your temperature. No offense, Billy, but you don't sound so good and you're awfully flush..."

"If I cared, I'd check myself," he snorts irritably. "Try to stick that under my tongue and I'll break it in half. Save your mother hen shit for Max."

With that, he slams the door in her face. They've no love for each other. On infrequent occasions Susan will forget this and make some half-assed attempt to get closer to him. Billy's always quick to remind her where they stand. It doesn't take much.

Afternoon rolls around without Susan bugging him anymore. Billy isn't a big reader but he doesn't feel up to much else between increasingly productive coughing bouts that leave him hacking up gross, greenish globs into his small wire mesh trashcan. So he flips

through some music magazines and the book he's supposed to read for english class until he gathers enough energy to kick himself into gear.

He didn't bother changing out of his clothes yesterday so he doesn't need to change now. Just sprays himself with some cologne, figures he probably smells because he's sweating nonstop. Discomforting drenching cold sweats like getting caught outside in icy rains, an experience Billy was blissfully unfamiliar with until Neil decided to leave sunny California behind.

He browses the small medical selection at Melvald's, grabs a couple bags of cherry flavored lozenges and a bottle of cough syrup. Covers a couple fits with the crook of his elbow on the way to the counter. He swallows the gunk that comes up because there's nowhere to spit it into and scrunches his nose in disgust, feels like freaking slime sliding down his throat.

It's the town cuckoo who rings him up. Or that's her reputation anyway but she doesn't seem particularly nutty to Billy. Hell, seems less weird than Susan does when she's doing shit like talking to the spiders she takes outside.

"Time to go, Little Creepy Crawly," she'd singsonged last week, shaking a daddy longlegs out of her tissue on the front porch. "Go be free."

"You need fucking friends," Billy had told her after the fact. Sound advice, he'd thought. Susan only ducked her head and disappeared into the next room.

Town Cuckoo gives the amount. Billy digs through his wallet and comes up two dollars short. Ugh. Fucking brandname linctuses. Shit's a ripoff but there was no generic equivalent on the shelf.

She tells Billy it's on the house, forehead crinkling just a bit as she studies him, eyes all melty with sympathy. Screw that shit. Billy isn't anybody's charity case. He gives her a pointed glower as he stamps a five down on the counter, takes the two bags of lozenges, and leaves.

He eats through half of the first bag until his throat tingles with

menthol and artificial sweetness, and actually manages to sleep for a few solid hours. He knows it's been hours because when he wakes himself coughing, it's dark out. Nighttime.

Billy curls inward with the spasms, tries to catch his breath between stabbing pains. This sucks so much. He's hacking up more gunk. Attempts to rub some of the discomfort from his heavy, congestion leaden chest to no avail.

He just keeps coughing and coughing and he knows before long, Neil's going to get in his shit about the noise so he forces himself to throw off the covers. His bruises are still healing. He doesn't need any more.

Billy crams his feet in his boots and drags himself down the hall. To his surprise, Susan's sitting at the kitchen table. She's crying. The sobs wrack her whole body the way the coughs wrack his and her cheeks are blotched cherry red just like his lozenges, tear tracks shining under the kitchen light. It throws him, really. He's lived with Susan for years and he doesn't think he's ever seen her cry. She just. Doesn't show much emotion at all, let alone displays like this.

Billy watches it the way he'd watch a car crash. Susan doesn't even notice him until he's coughing again. He curls his fist around his mouth, muffles them as best he can. Fumbles for his car keys when he's made it through to the other side.

"Where could you possibly be going?" Susan asks, her voice thick, like there's a bubble in her throat.

Maybe Neil hit her. Billy's seen it so he knows it happens sometimes even though he's pretty sure it's not often. Not like how Neil hits him. Or hit his own mother. Susan is probably Neil's favorite, obedient like a well trained dressage horse following all of his cues. Isn't anything like his own mom who defied Neil like a wild mustang he couldn't tame, who went braless and smoked hash with the hippies, screamed her lungs out at Neil in furious harpy volumes and called him names no matter how mad it made him. Who did her best to give back as good as she got even outmatched, even if it made him madder, throwing things or fists or swinging Billy's Little League bat.



Susan is submissively behaved and tepid tempered, always wears her bra under the clothes Neil buys her in the fashions he prefers her in. Susan speaks softly and sweetly, never stays out unscheduled and doesn't smoke anything at all, always smells like floral perfumes and lotions, never ever, ever like cigarettes or marijuana or other men's cologne. When Neil hits Susan she goes slack and sloth and silent, and does not lift a finger to fight. It is the only thing she and Billy have in common.

"Nowhere," he answers. "Gonna sleep in the car before Neil gets on me about making noise."

"Billy, it's too cold for that...besides, Neil isn't going to wake up yet."

"How do you know?"

What, does Susan think she's a fucking fortune teller now?

Sure enough, she doesn't have a straight answer for him. She stumbles over syllables that don't shape into sentences and the last thing Billy feels like doing is indulging her.

"Pfft. That's what I thought. By the way, you're ugly when you cry." Billy glares at her until she turns away, timid, bowing her head. He heads out to the Camaro, gets in the driver's seat and pulls it back.

Yeah, it's cold out but he can't get warm inside under the blankets anyway. Neil's already in a bad mood. He'd only barked about the racket last night but his father's bite is worse than his bark and Billy knows better than to expect a second warning.

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Friday morning, the frosty air scrapes Billy's throat raw and makes him cough so, so hard. He's beyond done with this shit, fuck everything. He takes shallow breaths to avoid the pangs of going too deep. The coughing still brings up gunk he spits out and he can feel the congestion crackling in his chest like thick, goopy molasses drowning his lungs, sticking between every rung of his ribcage.

It's actually. Kind of. Beginning to concern him.

Is being sick normally like this?

Billy hasn't been sick in so long, he seriously doesn't know. But it's been days and he's not feeling any better. He feels worse. He really does. Breathing has become a grueling travail. Even to his own ears, his exhales sound wet and ratty. The coughing was a nuisance when it first came on but now it's just downright exhausting.

But.

Well. He's gotta be okay. He's too young to be like, seriously sick. It's probably just one of those things where it's going to get worse before it gets better. A lot of things are like that, right?

Everything gets worse before it gets better. He's fine. He's definitely fine.

Billy goes inside. Everyone's at the breakfast table and he doesn't take a seat because he's a biohazard and Neil already looks dour. Susan's pouring him coffee. Max nibbles at a piece of toast. She has a cut on her cheek that wasn't there when Billy saw her yesterday. Doesn't look bad, just a simple scratch stretched under her eye, but when he peers closer is that...is that a bruise?

Yes. It's pretty small. Faint. He would've missed it entirely if the thin red thread of her cut wasn't so stark against Max's pasty skin.

He's smart enough not to ask in front of Neil. He doesn't say anything. Gets the juice from the fridge and pours himself a glass. He's two sips in before he has to set it aside, covering his mouth as another fit takes hold.

Neil is glaring when he makes it through. Right. Don't cough around the food. Billy isn't even sitting with them but whatever. He's not gonna poke the bear. Heads off to Max's room and waits.

Eventually she comes in to get her backpack, frowning at his presence. "What're you doing in here?"

"What happened to your face?"

"Geez, Billy, you sound terrible." Her nose crinkles.

"I asked you a question, Max." Billy impatiently twirls his finger, slightly annoyed. He already knows he sounds bad, doesn't need to be reminded.

Max turns away from him with a shrug, starts stuffing her textbooks into the bag. "I fell on the pond yesterday when I was playing with my friends. Where I fell...the ice wasn't smooth. It was rough and it scratched."

Billy narrows his eyes and measures her up. It isn't a particularly unlikely story. But he wants to be sure.

"You'd tell me if it was Neil, right?"

"...of course I'd tell you if it Neil." Max looks up from messing with her stuff and faces him with clear resolution in her gaze. "Neil hits you all the time so if he hit me, you'd be the first person I'd tell."

Billy keeps his eyes on her as he goes over what she said. She doesn't look like she's lying. She doesn't sound like she's lying. Besides, Neil's striking hand probably would've left a bigger bruise and he can't place anything on it that would've scratched her skin like that. Neil's fingernails are short and blunt, smoother than Billy's, which get jagged when he bites. He doesn't wear rings beyond his wedding band, and his is smooth silver, no shiny rock cut in the middle like Susan's.

"Alright," he concedes, turns to leave.

The coughing fit hits heavy, like a wrecking ball to the chest. Billy hangs onto the doorframe with one hand, covers his mouth with the other. It'll pass. It'll pass. It'll pass.

Christ, he's sick of being sick.

It passes. Billy keeps his grip on the doorframe as he works on drawing in air.

"You okay?" Max asks from behind.

And he can't actually answer that just yet, still catching his breath.

“You sound really gross, like you’re literally dying.”

“I’m not...I’m fine...even run you to school, if you want.” Billy relaxes his grip on the doorframe and turns back to her.

“Oh.” Max perks up at that, eyes bright. “Yeah, can you?”

She lowers her voice as she adds, “I’m mad at my mom. I don’t really wanna ride with her.”

Billy doesn’t ask what for. It’s probably something stupid. Susan getting after her for not zipping up her coat or touching yellow snow or some other dumb shit. He’s too tired to care, really.

“Sure I can, s’what I just said, isn’t it? Finish getting your stuff together, bus leaves in five.”

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Billy doesn’t go home for a long time. After dropping Max off, he just sits in the parking lot for awhile, rests his head against the steering wheel while the heat blasts from the vents. He’s got it all the way up and he’s so sweaty his hair’s plastered to the back of his neck, but he’s still freaking cold.

He doesn’t know what he did to deserve this.

Or.

Okay, maybe he does.

Eventually he pulls out of the parking lot, drives around listening to music just to be doing something. Winds up in another lot, an empty lot, where the rumor is they’re going to build a mall next year. Billy hopes so. Hawkins is mind-numbingly boring. Sometimes he just wants to scream about it, set fire to the fucking cornfields and scream at the top of his lungs.

His lungs aren’t really up to screaming right now though. Neither is his throat, really, tender from coughing spasm after coughing spasm tearing it up. Billy doesn’t know if he’s even been this sick.

He’s even considering bringing it up to his dad, maybe even. Asking

Dad for help. And that.

That means he's either desperate or delirious, and neither is a particularly reassuring thought.

Fuck.

Billy despises the fact it even crossed his mind. He can't go to Neil. He won't. That's stupid. Neil would probably just dig him out some more expired vapor rub. Definitely wouldn't take him to a doctor, at least not until the bruises heal. Maybe he'd compromise and get him the cough syrup Billy didn't have enough cash for...

Between musings, Billy finds himself squeezed in another fit that pummels his chest like invisible fists. It's so bad he's left battling for just a breath of air, so forceful for one very scary second he's even worried he won't get it. That the coughing will go on and on, and he'll never take another breath again. That they'll find his body right here in the empty lot where maybe the mall will be one day.

Except the coughing eventually does subside and Billy does manage to get some air. But the fit spooks him a little. Takes enough out of Billy that he decides he's probably going to have to go to Neil. Shit.

He puts it off as long as he can. Doesn't even go home until he knows everyone is done with dinner. To his surprise, Neil isn't watching tv. Billy heads down the hall. The light is on under Max's door. The light is on under the master bedroom door too. Billy hesitates before knocking.

Does he really need to go to Neil?

Maybe he was exaggerating when he was worried earlier. Billy's hand retracts from the door. It's promptly clamped around his mouth for what must be the hundredth time. He's hacking hard into his palm, chest throbbing.

He doesn't actually mean to open the door. But he grabs the knob for support and jerks when the metal is shockingly cold under his fingers. The next thing Billy knows, he's stumbling over the threshold.

Susan whips toward him, eyes as wide as dinner plates and mouth frozen open in horror. At first Billy thinks it's him. She's so disgusted she's horrified by him and his biohazard germs and any second Neil's going to pick his head up from the bed and bark at Billy for intruding without so much as a knock, and then—

Then his eyes fall to the long bloodied baiting needle in Susan's suddenly trembling hands.

"S-Self d-defense," she quavers, backing away, that needle outward in her shaky, shaky hands almost like she thinks Billy's going to advance on her. "It was s-self defense, B-Billy, I had to."

Because Neil's still motionless, facedown on the bed even though his son's still coughing, making a racket and expelling biohazard bacteria in his very bedroom. He's still coughing, fuck, his eyes are watering, but they aren't so watery he can't see what's right in front of him. Billy plants a hand down against the dresser and tries to breathe.

"Self defense," he rasps at the end of the fit, blinking at the acupuncture kit open inches away from his hand on the dresser.

"S-Slightly preemptive self defense," Susan amends, swallowing. "Make no m-mistake, I had to. I had to, he— he was right on the verge of a b-blowup. You know your father, Billy."

That is true. Billy knows his father well. He doesn't speak to Susan as he shuffles up to the bed. Gulps down some of the gunk in his throat, grazes his father's cheek with his fingertips. There's blood welled up in a hole at the base of his skull but he's warm, kinda, so maybe Susan didn't kill him after all. He moves his fingers to feel for a pulse.

It isn't there. Neil's dead? Neil's really dead?

"Dad?" he tries. It comes out a hoarse squeak. He clears his throat and tries again. "Dad? Dad, c'mon."

Billy jostles his father's shoulder. It yields no response. The bare skin is still warm, deceptively so. There's not so much as a flicker of life beneath it.

“Holy shit,” Billy gasps.

Susan presses back against the wall, eyes still very wide, clutching that baiting needle so tight her knuckles are blanched. Her hands shake and shake.

“What are you going to do?” she asks in a whisper.

“What am I going to go?” Billy echoes. “I— I don’t know! What are you going to do? Call the cops?”

Because even if her self defense was preemptive, to use her description, maybe it’d still fly. Billy has bruises. Maybe Susan has some too hidden under that deep cranberry dress.

“Cops?” Susan’s mouth tightens as her head gives a firm shake. “Of course not. Don’t you know what police are like? Your father would’ve fit right in.”

Billy considers this as he coughs, stuffing them into the sleeve of his leather jacket. He can’t say his own experience with the law has ever been positive. And Neil was a security guard. What’s a security guard if not a wannabe cop?

“You planned this,” Billy heaves out when he’s done coughing.

“I’m....I mean, y-yes, but I—“

“What was your plan?” Billy interrupts. “Where were you going to go from here?”

“I didn’t expect you to show up,” Susan says, soft and frowning.

“I live here,” Billy points out and he laughs. Strange, strained laughter peals out of him until it triggers another bout of coughing because. What. The. Actual. Fuck.

“Oh, Billy...do you want some water? Maybe you should sit down.”

“Where?” he rasps between coughs. “Next to my dead dad?!”

“Keep your voice down,” Susan urges, waving the needle like a

conductor's baton. "Max is still awake."

Billy wipes the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. Stares at Susan as he does his best to take even breaths.

"You're wheezing."

"You're deflecting," he fires back. "What are you going to do?"

"Um, uh...chop him up," Susan admits quietly. "I'd p-planned to chop him up."

"That'll make a mess," Billy blurts out, blunt.

"Messy, yes, but it's the easiest way. I can't exactly carry him."

Billy touches the small of Neil's bare back, skims his fingertips between hair thin acupuncture needles. He probes at the small of his own back, winces when dull pain pulses through the bruise. His throat is thick with something other than phlegm and his heart is racing rabbitly fast. In this moment, Billy makes a decision.

"Not by yourself."

Susan gapes.

"Where we taking him?" Billy asks.

"I...I honestly didn't have an exact location mind, but farther away. Not here in Hawkins, the town is too small." Susan swallows again and tugs at her sleeve. "I planned to bag his parts in pieces and drive a few hours out and spend the night disposing of the bags in different areas."

That makes sense, he thinks.

"Sometimes I go to this gay bar about two hours away. Pretty big dumpster in the back."

Billy tries to hit it at least once a month, if he can save up enough of his allowance for gas. Sometimes he collects enough chump change from idiots at school who forget to close their lockers, and isn't above



duping people outta their dough by turning on the charm, either. His interest in girls isn't exclusive, he finds a helluva lotta guys interesting too. It's just nice to get out of fucking Nowheresville even on the nights he doesn't end up fooling around with anybody.

Susan looks absolutely bewildered.

"Gay bar," he repeats slowly. "You know. Pride pub, homo hub?"

"I know what a gay bar is, Billy. Why on earth are you going to one?"

"Gee, I don't know, maybe it's because I'm secretly a drag queen bingo champion," Billy scoffs in annoyance and it turns into a cough. The one sets off a fit.

"Billy, um...I don't, um. I'm not judging your preference in partners or your private life, but you're too young to be going to the bar. Any bar. It's not legal, you're a teenager."

Jesus, he can hardly breathe. He feels like he's going to fall over. Maybe he actually should've sat down next to his dead dad.

"Oh dear. I'm— I'm going to get you some water."

Billy doesn't fall over. He has good stamina. He's hard to knock over, prides himself on that fact. He makes it through the fit upright. His chest is sore from the stabbing and he's a little dizzy, perhaps from fatigue or breathlessness, but he's steadfast.

Billy accepts the glass Susan holds out to him upon her return. Her fingers feel like icicles as they brush his and he suppresses a shiver. Takes slow sips and finds a little relief. Eventually sets the glass down on the dresser when he's done.

"Technically, it's not me who goes to the bar. You're right, I'm not twenty-one yet. But Jason Scott on the other hand, well, he's twenty-five." Billy fishes his wallet out and frees his fake ID from its fold. "Looks pretty legit, right?"

Susan silently studies the piece of plastic and worries her lip between her teeth.

"But we don't actually have to go into the bar to put my dad's body in the dumpster anyway. I mean, going inside would really be a pretty bad idea..."

"Indeed it would, but I'm glad you showed this to me. It wouldn't be smart to put Neil anywhere you or I associate with at all. But if you're not actually associated, it's an option."

"It'd take less time than the way you were gonna go about it. Cleaner too."

Susan nods her agreement. "However, I still might...mm, Billy. I'm not sure if you're going to like this. But in order to prevent him from being identified, I think I'm going to chop off his head...and his hands. Well, perhaps those I'll just burn with the clothes iron, um. Either way, his fingerprints need to be destroyed."

Billy's gut lurches as he soaks it in. It sounds logical. He can't deny that, but something about the idea of his dad's decapitation doesn't sit. Kinda gives him the heebie-jeebies. And that's weird. That's really weird because he's okay with everything else.

Well.

Okay, maybe he's not okay with it, but. He understands it. It's Neil. Of course he understands the bruises she may or may not be hiding, the fear in her heart regardless.

"Do you have to chop his head off? Can't you just smash his face in?"

"I considered that," Susan says, nodding again. "Those cast iron lion bookends on the shelf are nine pounds each. I weighed them this morning."

Billy likes the sound of that better. Neil is going to be dead and disfigured either way. He's not sure why it makes a difference. Maybe it doesn't, really. He thinks he might have a fever. Maybe the fever's just getting to him, making him a little loopy and pulling his thoughts in less than rational directions.

"I could do that part," he offers. It'd probably take him less time to

bash Neil's face in than it'd take Susan. He has more physical prowess, after all, more power to put behind the blows.

"Are you up for that?" she asks, eyeing him skeptically.

"Yes," he snaps, somewhat defensive. He's sick but he's not helpless.

Billy's claim isn't undermined by the brief bout of coughing that overtakes him. He halts the reflex to clutch his ribs. Not now, not in front of her. Especially not with what they have to do.

"There's two bookends," Susan points out, seems a little nervous as she watches him cough. "We could take turns."

With that, she disappears from view. Billy hacks some more gross globs into his hand and for convenience's sake, just wipes it off on his jeans. When Susan comes back, she has one of those big black contractor trash bags. Spreads it out on the bed beside Neil's form.

They roll him together and Billy doesn't know what to make of what he feels when he actually sees his father's face, features devoid and dead. Very, very dead. Tears do not sting his eyes. They just well up watery because he's coughing again, battling for breath again, so, so wrung and exhausted, lungs like sodden sponges sopped with sputum.

Then he's holding the bookend, cast iron artistically sculpted, the maned king of the jungle bearing his teeth in a roar. Billy looks at his father's dead face and hesitates for only a heartbeat. When he brings the heavy object down, he puts all the force he can muster behind it and it makes an utterly atrocious noise Billy will never forget, but—

Some part of him has always wanted to do this. For that part of him, it is the only thing he's ever truly wanted. And when Susan takes her turn Billy watches her face and realizes, *oh*, going slack and sloth and silent with the taste of Neil Hargrove's hand isn't the only thing they share at all.

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They wait until late to don gloves and roll Neil up in the shower liner. They stuff him in the bed of his own truck for transport. Billy

takes the torso end because it's heavier, Susan hefts him under the legs. Billy drives because he knows the way even though it's the last thing he feels like doing.

It goes mostly okay. He only has a paroxysm bad enough to make him pull over once.

Susan reaches across the seats and rubs his shoulder. Billy's too busy getting his breath to shrug her off.

"I'm sure you're not going to love this idea, but I think it's time to see a doctor. This could be bronchitis, Billy, or even pneumonia."

"Pneumonia isn't real," Billy grouches tiredly. "It's like the boogeyman. Just some story old people made up so their grandkids wouldn't play in the rain and track mud all over the house."

"Uh...um." She blinks owlishly, forehead creasing. "No, that's not quite accurate..."

"I'm screwing with you, Susan." Because that's easier than conceding to her.

It would've been one thing with Neil. As fucked up as things were, Neil was his dad. Neil was *supposed* to take care of him.

But Susan. Susan is different. Susan is mostly Max's weird mom who displays about as much emotion as a mannequin whenever she isn't (wasn't) dancing on Neil's puppet strings or talking to the spiders as she shakes them free from soft tissues. Albeit tonight is a game changer. They're very literally partners in crime now.

"We could even go to the ER after this," she suggests uncertainly, wary edge to her tone.

"That's for emergencies. I can wait."

"If you're sure." Susan hums in her throat and draws her hand away.

They have good timing. The bar's been closed for almost an hour by the time they get there and all the cars have cleared out. Billy backs up to the dumpster so he and Susan can stand on the bed and lift Neil

in that way, rather than having to drag his deadweight out and struggle to raise his cumbersome bulk up over the side.

He doesn't want to be out here any longer than he has to. Whole thing gives him the heebie-jeebies. He feels like a cop is about to pull up any second now and frankly, it's cold as fuck. He's cold as fuck.

Not as cold as the unearthly chill that seems to pierce through the plastic liner when Billy lifts his father's trunk for the second time tonight.

"Do you feel that?" he irresistibly asks Susan, watching her adjust her grip on Neil's legs and searching her face for the eeriness he's feeling.

"Feel what?" Susan asks, frowning.

Death itself? Billy doesn't know.

"Nothing, it's...just cold, I guess."

"Oh, Billy, I think you have the chills."

And he knows he does but it's not the same thing. He doesn't comment any more on it. Together they get Neil up on the metal rim of the open dumpster, push him over. Garbage crunches and crinkles beneath his deadweight. Billy feels another coughing fit coming on and manages to suppress it until he gets back inside the truck.

"Do you want me to drive home?" Susan asks.

"No. I know the way better, it's easier if I do it."

"You could, um. I mean, you could direct me if I get a little turned around. You're looking pretty tuckered out." It's dark but Billy can hear the frown in her voice.

"Alright," he sighs out. "Fine."

Because she's not wrong. He's drained at this point. Shoving his dad's body in the dumpster spent the last store of energy he had. He and Susan swap places. She doesn't have much trouble once she actually

gets back on the main road.

“Thank you,” she murmurs eventually. “If I had to do this myself, I’d still be in the middle of it.”

“Yeah...sure thing, I guess.” She killed his dad. No big deal. Billy blinks, isn’t sure what else to say.

“...so, um...you like the fellas, huh?” she asks, voice light and not a bit unkind.

“Uh-huh.” He shrugs. “Guys, girls, I mean, I’m not that picky. A hole’s a hole, a mouth’s a mouth, fingers are fingers.”

Susan chokes on a scandalized gasp and Billy gets a chuckle out of it, even as it turns into a cough.

“That’s, uh. T-That’s certainly crude.”

And it’s funny really, that Susan seems more creeped out by a boorish comment than she did by holding his dead dad’s corpse legs.

By the time they get home, Billy’s so beyond spent he knows he can’t even make it to his room. Doesn’t bother to try. Collapses on the couch cushions without attempting to take his boots off. Smothers what has to be the goddamn millionth round of coughs into the throw pillow.

When he picks his head up, Susan’s standing there, fiddling with the thermometer again, fretful expression on her features. Oh, fuck it. Fine. Billy bites the bullet and takes it from her, begrudgingly jamming the thing under his tongue.

### **Author's Note:**

i once again apologize to u, Anon, this was prolly not the direction u wanted ur prompt to go in at all. i'm sorely lacking in the fluff department, but i hope u enjoyed anyway.